BOOK REVIEW

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The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad. **Edited by Jonathan E. Brockopp**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 326p. ISBN 978-0-521-88607-9 (HB), 978-0-521-71372-6 (PP).

> "Europeans and Western people are making research on every subject… except the personality of Sayyidina Muhammad, *salla Allahu 'alayhi wa-sallam*." Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani in his *khutbat al-Jumu'a* at the First International Islamic Unity Conference in Los Angeles on August 2, 1996.

The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad is a collection of fourteen essays introduced by *Judaism and Islam in practice: A Sourcebook* author Jonathan E. Brockopp and written, the back cover blurb informs us, "to engage and inform… readers coming to the subject for the first time." The essays are presented in three parts respectively entitled "Muhammad in his world" (three historico-biographical essays and the book's most relevant part), "Muhammad in history" (six monographical essays on "his legacy as a law maker, philosopher, and politician"), and "Muhammad in memory" (five essays on "how Muhammad has been remembered… in biography, prose, poetry… film and fiction") by professors active in university departments of religion, theology, Islamic studies, Arabic studies, Asian and African studies, near eastern languages and civilizations, and history in the US (9), Israel (2), the UK(1), Canada (1), and France (1).

Of all the contributions in this volume University of Exeter Arabist and expert on legal theory Robert Gleave's article in Part Two (pp. 103-122), "Personal piety" (a misnomer), on the juristic hadith-based determination of obligation versus mere desirability and whether the Prophet "can make mistakes," impressed me for its fair tone and general accuracy--even if he adduces four forgeries in its first three pages. The rest do not live up to the promise of the title nor do they rise to Shaykh Nazim's challenge, leaving seekers of a true Muhammad vade mecum defrauded.

In 1982 Salah al-Din al-Munajjid published a 400-page "sourcebook of works about the Messenger of Allah" (*Mu'jam ma Ullifa 'an Rasulillah*) in twelve sections of up to twenty-one sub-sections each, documenting the massive tradition of hadith, *sira*, *shama'il*, *khasa'is*, *dala'il*, *nasab*, *tarikh* and the interactive/paradigmatic manuals of *mawalid*, *salawat*, and *mada'ih* among other aspects of the study of the Prophet. It is disappointing that, thirty years later, a work purporting to be an English-language guide to the same subject that gave rise to such a still-growing mine of published material is only a festschrift offering snapshots often devoid of relevance to its subject-matter. Worse, the *Cambridge Companion to Muhammad* is a faithless one in three senses:

1. It maintains a wall of separation between itself and its supposed company, whom it distrusts as it does all of hadith, *sira*, and *tafsir*:

> By *portraying* the law as a *well-designed* series of rationally explainable interactions between the Qur'an and the Sunna, the role of the Sunna *was made to seem* not only integral but absolutely indispensable to the structure of the law (Joseph E. Lowry, p. 87; emphasis added).

> Muhammad's biographies should not be classified as history books… among Muslims, the[ir] popularity… is based not on the historical evidence that they include but on their didactic, edifying, propagandistic, and entertaining features that address the needs of readers and listeners on various educational, psychological, and artistic levels. Had it not been for those features, the biographies would have been forgotten or marginalized long ago. (Michael Lecker, p. 63)

> "The post-Qur'anic sources read back" *sira* events into the Qur'an because "[p]ost-Qur'anic Muslims needed a hero who could be venerated.... a new Muhammad, a person blessed with powers that he still lacked in the Qur'an and that bridged the gap between him and the previous prophets." (Uri Rubin, p. 52, 56-57)

Rubin (p. 50) disputes the Islamic historicity of the splitting of the moon by pitting chainless *tabi'i* reports from fifth-century *tafsir*s against Bukhari's (194-256/810-870) narrations from Ibn Mas'ud and other Companions of this mass-transmitted (*mutawatir*) event.

The systematic denial of historicity and of the reliability of hadith and *sira* (although they function as convenient sources at will) is the staunchest of the eight myths of Orientalism I listed in my review of Gregor Schoeler's *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam* (*Muslim World Book Review* 27 no. 4, Summer 2007). Another is the myth of Christian origins, here revived by *In Defense of the Bible* author Walid A. Saleh in rather mean terms:

> The Qur'an is emphatic about… the mundane character of the human Muhammad. … he is emphatically a *bashar*, a human being. The Christological background for this humbleness is deafening, a humbleness that soon early Muslims would shed. He is certainly not a miracle worker in the Qur'an…. The Muhammad we have is fashioned by the *Sira*, and a remapping of the Qur'an is carried out on the miraculous presentation of the *Sira*. … The *Sira* thus is emphatic about the role of mythology in presenting the significance of Muhammad, and if the Qur'an was not so obliging in this regard, it was made to be. (Saleh, pp. 29-30)

The volume bristles with similar charges of large-scale mendacity implied by such terms as "fashioned," "remapping," "mythology," "read back," "artistic," etc., of which more are quoted below.

2. It mostly ignores the heritage of sources and devotional nexus centring on the Prophet in favour of a cocktail of marginal information. We read page after page on *falasifa* speculations on the nature of Prophethood, Ibn Sina's grand finding that prophecy consists of properties that "are not unique to prophets" and the claim, no sooner made than withdrawn, that "al-Ghazali… had no problem accepting the implication that Muhammad formed the wording of the Qur'an, albeit he never expressed that openly" (Frank Griffel, pp. 173, 178). We read of medieval and modern demonization constructs (John V. Tolan's *European Accounts of Muhammad's Life* but without a single reference to Norman Daniel's 1960 *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image*); of Egypto-French modernism, from the litterateur and Sorbonne-trained lawyer Muhammad Haykal (1888-1956, a Muslim Goldziher who aimed to deny miracles and was nescient of hadith although hailed by Anna M. Gade as methodologically rigorous, p. 254) to Tariq Ramadan; and of *Sira*-inspired proselytism in second and third-rate Indonesian publications (Gade, "Religious biography of the Prophet Muhammad"). The latter genre supposedly "tends to follow typical structures as part of an ongoing pious biographical process" (pp. 258-259) but Gade shows no knowledge of *Simt al-Durar* (The Strand of Pearls), the long biographical verse and prose poem of 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Habshi (1259-1333/1843-1915) that is ubiquitous in Javanese *mawlid* gatherings and which reads, among other vibrant lines:

> *Glory to Him Who caused to appear out of the Court of Bestowal*
> *What the tongue remains incapable of describing,*
> *and conscience wanders in search of its apprehension.*
> *From him spread into the world of inward and outward things*
> *something that filled all created existence with light.*
> *May God be blessed--and what a generous God!*
> *His Signs announced to us in the Wise Remembrance*
> *His glad tidings: "There has come to you a Messenger from yourselves,*
> *unto whom is grievous that you be overburdened,*
> *full of concern for you, for the believers full of pity, merciful." (Q 9:128)*
> *Whoever chances upon this good news and receives it with a sound heart*
> *is well-guided to the straightest path.*

Even hagiography aside, it is puzzling that a modest 300-page guidebook that purports to accompany readers to their first encounter with the ultimate Prophet of monotheism digress into Umawi and 'Abbasi conceptions of state leadership (rather than "Muhammad as head of state" as promised by Asma Afsaruddin in the title of her essay), "psychological experiences… [and] fantastical episodes from venues long forgotten" (Shahzad Bashir in his essay on Timurid Sufis), and twenty-first-century Indonesia *Ikhwan* productions promoting "successful, corporate prophetic life management" (Gade, p. 272). Even less congruous are Ali Dashti, the Danish cartoons, Taha Husayn, and Salman Rushdie in the essay "Images of Muhammad in literature, art, and music" (Amir Hussain, pp. 280-286) which to this reader evokes a half-hour of incendiary Youtube clips with footnotes. The list of past and contemporary pathologies is endless but they are, one and all, irrelevant to the subject of this volume.

3. It fails at reflecting a Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad too living, vibrant, and paradigmatic to be discussed without being engaged on a practical basis along with 1,400 years of their scholarly throng. But that would be, Brockopp laments, "simply abandon[ing] the task of understanding Muhammad in his own world, seeking rather to understand the ways in which his followers have perceived him" (p. 13). The implication of course is that the two are mutually exclusive: we should leave it to non-followers to bring out "the historical Muhammad" from the class notes of Princeton and Haifa.

It would have been a good start to address the diachronic and synchronic continuities of the supposedly unhistorical personas of angelic interlocutor, Lawgiver, *uswa hasana*, inimitable speaker, charismatic leader, healer, and *haqiqa Muhammadiyya* that the Prophet embodied. Do first-time readers really care that "Islamic discourses must be seen as a collection of dynamically interacting propositions rather than as stable intellectual systems with clear prescriptions and easily identifiable boundaries" (Shahzad Bashir, p. 224)? Rather than the groupthink "*We* do not know why a certain account was accepted in the mainstream literature while other accounts were pushed aside," "*We* still do not understand the literature on Muhammad's life…" (ask *us!*) and the advice to "put aside--for the time being--the *masses of insignificant details*" (Lecker, pp. 61,75; emphasis added), why not introduce readers to the late master of Aleppo Shaykh 'Abd Allah Siraj al-Din's (1923-2002) encyclopedic biography recently translated and published as *Our Master Muhammad the Messenger of Allah: His Sublime Character and Exalted Attributes*, a work comparable to nothing less than the arch-classic *Shifa* of Qadi Iyad (471-544/ca.1078-1149). Too hagiographic? A chapter on the rich literature on the Prophetic Names--from Ibn Faris's (d. 395/1005) *Asma' Rasulillah wa-ma'aniha* to the late Mawlana Yousuf Ludianvhi's (1932-2000) 2,500-page trilingual masterpiece *The Bountiful Names of the Prophet*--would have been more appropriate to a basic guide for neophytes than disclaimers posing as scholarly thoughts. Ah. Too hagiographic.

Instead, the book promotes the historicist construct of a genesis of ideas the writers agree upon as man-made (Marion Holmes Katz's "mythic richness… narratives produced by early Muslim historians" p. 142), in constant creative evolution (Carl W. Ernst's "[t]he ascension of Muhammad… *became* a major theme… the Prophet *became increasingly* invested with the power of intercession," "a large narrative tradition *has emerged* on this topic" pp. 124, 128; Gade's "ongoing, pious biographical process" pp. 258-259), and as heterogenous and disintegrated (Bashir, loc. cit.) as the *Cambridge Companion* itself, topped by many inaccuracies and oddities. Among them:

- Brockopp claims that the name *Allah* was known to the pagan Meccans "as that of a high god who had especial control of weather and ships at sea" and that the earlier suras tolerate polytheism (p. 3, 6). Most of the Meccan suras lambast it, and the very first article mentions the "radical monotheism" (Saleh, p. 36) of Surat al-An'am, a Meccan sura. Furthermore, the Meccans knew Allah not as Aeolus or Poseidon but as the Creator of heavens and earth (Q 29:61, 31:25, 39:38) as well as human beings (Q 43:87), the Giver of life and death and all sustenance (Q 10:31), owner of the earth and everything in it (Q 23:84), Lord of the seven heavens and Lord of the Magnificent Throne (Q 23:86) and the Omnipotent Sovereign (Q 23:88). He cites as his example of the contradictions of the *Sira*s their inclusion of "two accounts of Muhammad's chest being split open" instead of one (p. 11). But in reality there are four: when he was a toddler, at puberty, when he received prophethood, and just

before his Night Journey and Heavenly Ascent. He assumes that "Muslims" and "scholars" are two mutually exclusive entities: "The focus, they ['Western scholars'] argue, should be on who Muslims say Muhammad was, not on who scholars say he was". Orientalism, on the other hand, bears Jules Ferryesque promises of betterment for the natives: "To be sure, some non-Muslim scholars still remain blithely unaware of the influence their research can have on the Muslim world" (p. 13).

- Dhul-Qarnayn in Surat al-Kahf is misassumed to be Alexander the Great (Saleh, p. 38) when many of the commentaries doubt it and Ibn Kathir (700-774/1301-1373) rejects it out of hand. As the great exegete Ibn al-Muzaffari (d. 630/1233) said in his *Lata'if al-Qur'an*, Dhul-Qarnayn was among the three pious non-Prophet Muslim kings explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an along with Talut and Tubba'.

- Q 4:65 "may reflect that Muhammad was viewed by his early followers as a *hakam*, an arbitrator, or as a *kahin*, a soothsayer" (Lowry, p. 84)!

- Contrary to the claim made by Asma Asfaruddin (p. 185), the general Sunni conception of precedence in the religion (*sabiqa*) does not put Successors in third place after the earliest *Muhajirun* and the *Ansar* but rather puts the remainder of the Companions in third place and the Successors in fourth place. As one of the prominent early Muslims put it in hyperbolic terms, "dust in the nostrils of Mu'awiya is better than 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz!"

- "No Islamic rite plays a role analogous to that of the Christian Eucharist, which places the figure of Jesus firmly at the center of the ritual life of the community" (Holmes Katz, p. 139). On the contrary: reciting the Qur'an does--as demonstrated by Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) in his 1961 *Comprendre l'Islam*--and, also more central a rite than even a daily Eucharist, the dozens of obligatory daily recitations of the *shahada* in every twenty-four hours, not to mention the supererogatory ones.

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